



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The Mount Vernon Cotton Factory

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Image: 1853 print, "View of Alexandria Va." published by J.T. Palmatary courtesy, Alexandria Library.

This painting of Alexandria from 1853 shows the viewer a depiction of the seven-year-old Mount Vernon Cotton Factory, now at 515 N. Washington St. In 1846, a state charter with 10 investors opened a four-story brick factory, with other outbuildings, on the one acre of real estate between Oronoco and Pendleton streets. The enterprise had the blessing of the local populace because it was an employment opportunity. The factory employed 150 people, mostly women who earned between \$12 and \$17 a month.

Despite the optimism surrounding its opening, the factory failed to meet the expectations of its stockholders. In fact, in March 1852, the board of directors decided to lease the factory to another company starting that August – before the painting was finished.

More bad news befell the building on July 21, 1854. Its night watchman, 21-year-old Michael Kiggin, was found beaten to death. Though two people were arrested in the case, they were both released without being charged. Three months later, a common nemesis to Alexandria's buildings came to the Cotton Factory, as a fire was started by a sack of cotton accidentally coming into contact with a gas lamp. Luckily, quick action prevented the fire from significantly spreading, and the factory returned to normal operations within a matter of days.

However, the factory's misfortune led the partners to sell the business the next year. A combination of old and new partners bought the four-story factory, the picking house, the engine house, a brick office and a fireproof waste house for \$26,000. Three years later, that partnership sold the operation to John Rosencrantz of Philadelphia for \$35,000. Rosencrantz and two partners renovated the factory and got the machinery in working order. For once, the business prospered.

But that came to an abrupt halt on May 24, 1861, when the Union Army came to occupy Alexandria. Like many large buildings in the city, the Mount Vernon Cotton Factory was requisitioned by the Army. Unlike many buildings which became makeshift hospitals, 515 N. Washington was used as a prison for captured Confederate soldiers.

The prison was run by Capt. R.D. Pettit, a man who was court-martialed after the war for his cruelty to his charges. His interrogation techniques drew the scrutiny of his superiors, and after his conviction he was dismissed from military service. Pettit later became an attorney. Pettit's papers from his time as the warden can still be viewed at the Special Collections Library on Queen Street.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

The end of Pettit's military career was not the end of the facility's life though. We'll continue its story next week, as it took on a new significance in Alexandria's economy.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.